

St. Augustine's Use of Psychological Analogy in Pro-Nicene Defense of the Tri-Unity of God

“We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being *of one substance* with the Father...” This excerpt of the Nicene Creed (italics mine) affirms the “tri-unity” of God, i.e. His essential three-in-one-ness, a theological doctrine that St. Augustine defended vigorously while serving as bishop of the Hippo Regius (A.D. 396-420) in Africa.

In his work, *de Trinitate* (“on the Trinity”), written over a period of sixteen years, Augustine makes his case for a triune God of “mutually related persons and a unity of equal essence” through the use of human analogies. The basis for such an approach rests in the idea that signs of God’s image can be found in His created order, as Dr. Scott Sherman, in a lecture on the Trinity,¹ explains. For example, in the same way that physical objects possess distinct dimensions (i.e. length, depth and height) that must coexist to comprise the whole, so do the three persons of the trinity. With regard to *human* analogies, however, Scott makes a distinction between a psychological analogy and a *social* one, a classic 4th century example being that debated between Gregory of Nyssa and Ablabius, i.e. Peter, James & John are distinct persons but “share in a single humanity².”

Augustine favored the use of psychological analogy, that is, the dynamic interplay of distinct human dimensions resident *within an individual* rather than among a *group* of individuals. For example, he asks the hearer to consider the triune nature of “mind,” “love” and “knowledge.” He begins by examining the relationship between “mind” and “love” when, in specific, the mind loves itself. “In the love of the mind for itself, two things are shown - mind and love. Now what is love of oneself other than the will to be at one’s own disposal for self-enjoyment? If the mind wills itself to be what it is, then “will” corresponds to “mind” and “love” [corresponds] to “lover,” he explains in *de Trinitate*. Therefore, he continues, “if love is some kind of substance, is not body but spirit, just as the mind is not body but spirit. Yet the mind and its love are not two spirits, but one spirit, not two essences, but one.” Having established this

¹ Rev. Dr. Scot Sherman, Ph.D, “God as Triune: Retrieving Classical Teaching”
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² Edward Hardy, editor, *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Louisville, Westminster Knox Press, 1954), 256.

equation, Augustine then argues that although a clear distinction can be made between “mind” and “love,” they are nonetheless mutually related. In other words, the mind and the mind’s *love of itself*, by definition, are bound together. The logic of his argument runs roughly as follows: from the mind, a spiritual entity, springs forth love (a spiritual substance) which is directed back towards itself (the originating substance) and therefore returns to itself. In other words, both are of the same spiritual substance.

He then proceeds to add the third dimension, necessary to construct his trinitarian hypothesis. He argues that in order for the mind to love itself, it must have *knowledge* of itself, the logic being, “How can a mind know any other mind if it does not know itself” if one assumes that the mind forms knowledge from other minds. Therefore, a mind, by necessity, has knowledge of its own mind. So if knowledge of self is necessary to the love of self, then it can be said that there are “three things - the mind, its love, and its knowledge” which can be described as distinct entities, one from the other, and yet are inextricably interdependent and bound together in a single system, as it were.

Augustine’s *de Trinitate* summarizes this interplay this way: “The loving mind is in the love, love is in the lover’s knowledge, and knowledge in the knowing mind. In a wonderful way, the three are inseparable from one another, and yet each of them is a distinct substance.” For Augustine, to understand this psychological analogy was to begin to comprehend the reality and wonder of the triune nature of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This particular analogy was not the only one that Augustine used. For example, he developed an argument based on the triad of *memory, understanding and will*. There were several others also psychology-based. The predominant use of such intellectually-sophisticated analogies from the realm of the human mind (i.e. an individualistic rather than an interpersonal approach) was not arbitrary, according to Alister McGrath. He explains that “Augustine asserts that the human mind is to be regarded as the apex of humanity. It is therefore to the individual human mind that the theologian should turn.”³ In other words, of all the discernible imprints (or *vestigium*) of God’s hand in creation, none are more convincing than this.

³ Alister McGrath, *Christian Theological Reader*, 4th Edition (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2011, 167)